

ARTICLE APPEARED
ON PAGE 312

THE WASHINGTON POST
7 September 1982

JACK ANDERSON

Strange Tales From Inside Land of Benin

Strange tales are filtering out of the steamy jungles of the Benin Republic, a self-identified Marxist-Leninist state that might be described as the Albania of West Africa.

Benin, a former French colony, is a Pennsylvania-size sliver of land on the underside of the African hump between Nigeria on the east and Togo and Upper Volta on the west. Since 1972 it has been ruled with erratic oppression by a former army major, Mathieu Kerekou, 42.

The word from the seven-member U.S. mission in Benin is that "the signs are good" for closer relations with the United States, following a cabinet shuffle by the president in April. This is noteworthy because Kerekou's favorite pastime used to be denouncing Americans as "imperialist pigs."

Our last ambassador there was James Engle, who arrived in 1974 just a few days before Kerekou announced that he was making Dahomey, as the country was then called, a Marxist state, and planned to exterminate the old ruling class.

Most of his intended victims managed to flee the country. One who

did not, according to rumor, was a high official who was caught in bed with Kerekou's wife and was summarily executed.

Despite Kerekou's habit of calling Engle in for long lectures on the joys of Marxist-Leninism, coupled with demands for more U.S. aid to "help our self-realization as a socialist state," the ambassador tried to get along. But it was sometimes hard to take the country seriously.

For example, when Kerekou announced in 1975 that Dahomey would henceforth be known as Benin, a top-secret document was prepared for President Ford, stressing the importance of proper pronunciation in dealing with the Beninese. U.S. officials should "take care in maintaining the distinction between the 'Benin Republic' on the one hand and 'banana' or 'benign' republic on the other," the briefing paper warned, explaining, "In English, the pronunciations are very similar, and offense could be taken if the nuance is missed."

On Feb. 12, 1976, Engle was summoned to Kerekou's office for an audience that outdid his previous experiences by a country mile. He related it in a top-secret report to Ford, titled, "Benin-U.S. 'Diplomatic' Relations." My associates Dale Van Atta and Joseph Spear have seen a copy of the report. Here it is in full:

"Ambassador Engle received 'barbaric treatment' from Benin Pres-

ident Kerekou when summoned to the presidential palace Feb. 12. After an insulting reception, the ambassador was preemptorily dismissed from the meeting.

"The foreign minister thereafter arranged a 'confrontation' with a kangaroo committee of inquiry, which tried to establish the ambassador's incompetence and dishonesty.

"The ambassador feels he 'won' whatever intellectual exchange there was."

In the space for personal comment, Engle added: "My incredible adventures of Feb. 12 must surely be counted among the most outrageous experiences any American chief of mission has ever undergone at the hands of the top leadership of any government. It is reasonable and proper at this point for the U.S. government to consider whether we should remain at all in Benin."

Ford recalled Engle, and no ambassador has been sent to Benin since.

But Kerekou, perhaps made uneasy by the attempted overthrow of the Seychelles president by white mercenaries, may have decided he'd better patch things up with the United States. According to one intelligence source, ideology will pose no problem for Kerekou. Benin went "Marxist" in hopes of getting its share of Moscow gold. "I don't think they knew what Marxism is," the source said.